



What Is Essential in Lutheran Worship?

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Lutheran theology directly addresses the matters of why, how, and whom we worship, and presently people belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are asked to consider a new hymnal with some amazing new suggestions. In light of that it is necessary to take up what Christians do in order to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Luther once declared to a new mission congregation in the town of Torgau: When it comes to your worship, “Beloved, put it on the scales and weigh it according to God’s Word.”¹ So we must start weighing what it is that we are proposing to do in our new liturgy, and for that we need a short story.

TWO COMPETING PIETIES

In a time not so long ago, 1977 to be exact, in a place not so far away, Yale Divinity School, Wolfhart Pannenberg delivered two astounding lectures on the theme of Christian spirituality. His idea, much in the air at the time, contrasted two

¹Martin Luther, *Sermon at the Dedication of Castle Church, Torgau* (1544), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 51:340 (hereafter *LW*).

Martin Luther’s simple definition of worship remains valid: “nothing else” need ever happen “except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise.” The essential moments of public worship are reading, preaching (including the presence and proclamation of Christ in the sacraments), and prayer.

kinds of “pieties” stemming from different liturgies, one bad and another good. A piety is a means of using an external sign to measure progress in the growth of righteousness, and can be used either by an individual or a group. The first piety was what he called “Protestant” piety that comes from the Reformation. It is bad. Its external sign is what he called “guilt consciousness.” Guilt was what happened when justification by faith alone apart from works of the law was preached by publicly declaring the forgiveness of sins in the worship service. The result of forgiving sins publicly was that nothing apparently happens to change the sinner. After forgiveness, the absolved remain just as they were before, and so they must blame themselves for the lack of transformation. In the end they feel guilty. Pannenberg thought this was a basic mistake of the Reformation that simply preserved the medieval preoccupation with confession and penance. Protestants then made matters worse than Catholics, for they not only created guilt but reinforced the idea that faith is individualistic. Forensic forgiveness never integrated people into community, nor did it move them closer to righteousness in themselves as measured by God’s law. At the end of the first lecture, there was a stirring of emotion among some in the audience. They felt Pannenberg had named their basic problem with Lutheran worship: it made them feel guilty and lonely. Lutheran worship failed to produce transformation and left people worse than if they hadn’t come at all. So much for the Reformation.

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Pannenberg’s second lecture sought to correct the problem with ingenious social engineering. To get rid of Protestant guilt and isolation he proposed a search for a better piety, and he believed he had just the one that would help. He called it “eucharistic” piety, which required a new liturgy. Instead of centering everything on preaching law and gospel, and so the forgiveness of sins, he proposed a new liturgy that would produce joy instead of guilt, and sponsor communal, rather than individual, faith. This new piety would center on feelings of joy and the work of giving thanks, and it would be composed of signs indicating that worshipers are visibly united while making Eucharist together. In short, he laid out the rationale for what has become known in Lutheran churches as the new “eucharistic celebration.” Communion is joy, not guilt; communal, not individual, and so is not the act of forgiveness of sinners but the public symbol of the united, joyful kingdom of the resurrected Christ as it makes its pilgrim journey to the promised land. Instead of death, celebrate life; instead of cross, resurrection; instead of guilt, joy. It was quite glorious to contemplate, as glory always is.

But changes in piety do not happen without liturgical innovation, as Pannenberg knew, so he proposed two basic changes to Lutheran liturgies. First, he

claimed that “the Eucharist, not the sermon, is the center of the church’s life,” and sought to prove that the Reformation was mistaken on this count.² At least for the Wittenberg teachers it was the proclamation, not the mass canon, that was deemed the center of worship—in both sermon and sacraments. For the Reformers this hardly marginalized the Lord’s Supper; indeed, it precisely identified the sacrament as a proclamation for the forgiveness of sins, giving Christ himself and alone. But Pannenberg proceeded further in his deconstruction. In order to achieve the new eucharistic piety of joy in the place of guilt there could be no absolution prior to Eucharist. Instead, following the communal “participation” in the Eucharist, by which he introduced the Platonic *Republic* to the church, he believed nothing of substance should come before the Eucharist. Only after the meal of joy should there be signs placed in the liturgy of the social justice implications of Christian life in order that good works would be produced during the week as a result of the energy of the communal joy of Sunday.

Pannenberg’s was not the old (and legitimate) concern about what is the proper preparation for communion; his concern was to use the Eucharist as *sign* of something better and higher than the mere word in bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. This ushered into modern Lutheranism one of the strangest twists in history. As no Lutheran pastors would even think of preaching a sermon according to the old theory of allegorical interpretation of Scripture, they now are participating in a grand drama of signs and metaphors that are multiplying exponentially in the liturgy. These signs are described allegorically so that baptism, for instance, becomes “bath,” with its multiple “signs” of water, oil, candle, and its “meaning” as initiation into the mysteries of the church; the Lord’s Supper becomes “meal,” in order to allow Eucharist to overtake Christ’s *last will and testament* as the true meaning of the signs of the Lord’s Supper. The eucharistic celebration is ever after centered on the theme of the many grains of wheat being gathered into one loaf that is meant to serve as an allegory for the unity of the church.³ Allegorical interpretation has found its way back into the center of Lutheranism by this means and has swept in a brand-new religion in its wake. Since allegory gives almost limitless possibility to preachers and liturgists it becomes difficult to turn back the tide, unless one truly begins to “weigh it according to God’s Word,” otherwise known as employing the single criterion of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law in all things—including the works of liturgy.⁴

²Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 40.

³See *Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). Principle L-3 reads: “The Holy Spirit creates the unity of Christ’s church...as a sign of God’s wide embrace” (4).

⁴One need not go so far back in history as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite for the allegorical use of liturgy, or even to the likes of Nicholas Cabasilas. One might consider the origin of allegory among “Protestants” with Huldrych Zwingli, including Zwingli’s preoccupation with the introduction of new eucharistic prayers full of signs, metaphors, or allegories regarding church unity. Even Russian orthodoxy and the great Alexander Schmemann have rejected attempts to allegorize the liturgy, and instead have attempted to point in a different direction that Schmemann calls “eschatological” (or evangelical, as Lutherans put it). See Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990) 89–100. Unfortunately Lutherans are now headed in the op-

Any piety needs enemies, and Pannenberg eventually provided three great enemies to eucharistic allegory that struck a deep chord with the last generation of Lutheran theologians. First, he identified the enemy of liturgy as secularism or paganism. Secularism was presumed to dissolve the church into society. To fight this, Pannenberg thought the church needed to be a city on a hill with visible signs and to regain its uniqueness in society as a special, appealing, and powerful community of the truly committed. This led to his plan for overcoming another great enemy of Eucharist that he called individualism (especially of the American kind). Building community rather than fostering individual guilt was what the church should be about in its eucharistic celebration. Pannenberg's final enemy was the legacy of the Reformation itself, especially its distinction of law and gospel that he believed conveyed guilt into the modern world. Instead of looking to the Lutheran Confessions for models of liturgical ordering, he thought one should look to the early (but not too early) patristic liturgies that would allow allegorical use of signs for the unity of the like-minded.

These lectures exemplified similar teachings sprouting among many theologians at the time, and for some, at least, Pannenberg's lectures were like an old-time revival, along with complete conversions of heart from what some called "Red Book" (*Service Book and Hymnal*) piety to "Green Book" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*) piety.⁵ The Red Book itself had introduced the idea of eucharistic piety, but only as the nose of the camel under the tent. Those old enough to remember may recall that the Red Book began each Sunday service with a Confession of Sin that said in part: "We poor sinners confess unto thee, that we are by nature sinful and unclean...."⁶ The Green Book removed the words "sinful and unclean," and gave two very different options for absolving sin, one unconditional and the other conditional. But most importantly the *LBW* made "Confession and Forgiveness" optional. In its place at the center was put the weekly "Eucharist" as primary measurement of the new piety. Several experimental eucharistic prayers were offered. Then Eucharist itself was described primarily as a symbol of what Pannenberg called the "visible unity" of the church. The moment of the eucharistic prayer was considered the moment in which the church was really being the church in its highest earthly expression—communal, joyful, resurrected, visible by means of

posite direction, as if by Zwingli's guidance. We have the theological basis for this laid in *Principles for Worship*, where Principle L-9 reads: "The church continually builds upon the vocabulary of the scriptures, expanding the treasury of language and images in order to proclaim the fullness of the triune God" (12). What once was the basic truth of preaching in the hearer's tongue has now become a treasury of images for allegorical use accompanied, of course, by spiritualism's *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* in a sign of church unity at the fellowship meal, just as Zwingli suggested: "In vain do we say that we make remembrance of him and what he did, if we do it by word alone...that we may show him forth in our lives...and surely, grant that all we who partake of the body and blood of your Son may have one hope and purpose, and be ourselves one in him, as he is one with you." Quoted in *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, ed. R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) 185.

⁵One of these conversion accounts is preserved in the autobiography of the missional liturgist Thomas H. Schattauer in "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 1–21.

⁶*Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg [et al.], 1958) 1.

signs, and united in mystical communion with its Lord, committed to its faith and motivated to serve the world.

But before we go down this road any further, we ought to stop and ask what is happening in the liturgy when forgiveness of sins is played off against a presumed “happier” and more socially productive piety called “Eucharist.” One could reasonably assume that what we get here is one more version of the old sinner’s preference for glory rather than cross. The next chapter of this story is being written now in the Renewing Worship materials as, for example, the two proposed texts to begin worship are preliminary to (in their own words) “word” and “meal” in the “shape of the rite” that they call the “gathering.” But more strikingly, the two options to start services are not even two “forms” of forgiveness of sins as they once were in *LBW*. They are now two versions of a double rite called Remembrance of Baptism. One version has no confession and absolution at all. In the place of absolution it puts a communal “Thanksgiving [Eucharist] for Baptism.”⁷ The new piety always places “remembrance” and “thanksgiving” where forgiveness of sins once stood.

THE WORSHIPING CONDITION

Why is this so appealing to so many of us? Religious ritual of any kind, long prior to Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, has been specially formulated to hide the killing of God and our part in it, and it must thereby also hide the way that God resurrects us from the dead. Ritual is conservative in the deepest sense, trying to hang on to the past as the last shred of life’s potential to change the future. Ritual throughout history identifies its special way of dealing with death as

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“remembering,” or *anamnesis*. As it normally operates among any tribe or church, worship leads to the form of selective remembering specifically designed to substitute a *sacrificial* victim that will stave off God’s anger at our sin and preserve the life of sinners under the delusion that we can become better by means of the law. We especially believe that what God wants is a happy heart. When Cain failed at worship he sought to remedy this by killing his brother; when this in turn failed, he sought an alternative to his own death, and thus we enter spiraling cycles of worship leading to violence, and violence leading to more worship. Worship in this

⁷Instead we get a prayer for the allegorical interpretation of the symbolism of water taken with large edits that specifically remove any references to death and sin from Luther’s “flood prayer.” Even in the confession itself reference to bondage is removed, and sin becomes “sins,” until finally in the theological explanation provided it is not even “sins” that we confess, but we merely “confess our need for mercy”! See *Renewing Worship 6: Holy Communion and Related Rites* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 6–8.

old, worldly fashion becomes sacrifice, or appeasement of an angry God. It seeks to find the way to make God, and so eventually ourselves, *happy*, docile, and in that sense at peace with our neighbors and our God. Worship thus serves an individual and communal need, and is usually so ordered—Christian or not—as “eucharistic piety.”

Yet, what if we wish neither to foster guilt nor produce the new eucharistic piety? What if we do not care to advocate American evangelical piety or Roman sacrifice? Is there anything to say about the Lutheran, evangelical witness and liturgy that is not simply dragging along the old medieval piety or returning to the life of allegorical sacrifice? Well, yes, if we bother to listen to evangelical teaching, it is quite revolutionary and even “renewing.” But, as usual, the gospel begins with some shocking assertions.

Christian worship is for dead people. It comes out of the liturgy of the burial of the dead. “You have died,” says the preacher Paul over and over again (e.g., Rom 6 and 7; Gal 2; 2 Cor 5). That means worshiping comes after we have died. Worse yet, worship is for dead people who nevertheless believe themselves to be able, well, and alive. Luther once summed it up this way: “Scripture, however, represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive.”⁸ When real sinners worship they are dead and blind to their death.

Inner-blind and outer-dead people are a very poor demographic for making worship work. The dead often lack promise and direction and are hard to motivate. Not knowing their condition makes it even worse, since they proceed to demand that worship motivate them to transform! Public preachers have to face these two tremendous problems day in and day out. They announce a reality that no one wants and oppose a delusion that everyone desires to keep. Being an ambassador for *anyone* is hard enough these days, but publicly speaking for Christ—and him crucified—is especially threatening, since publicly announcing words like “You have died” not only *unveils* the hidden truth, but *accomplishes* it. Visitors on any given Sunday find this kind of declaration of their condition unwelcoming. Regular attendees are more practiced in their denial, and seem able to take it with a grain of salt until finally the liturgy moves on to something they can actually do. Perhaps they have learned to think of worship as a “symbol system,” like modern liturgists suggest,⁹ so that “dead” and “blind” offer greater possibilities than their literal

⁸Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in LW 33:130.

⁹This is the most influential group of ELCA liturgists since the writing of the *Use of the Means of Grace* statement; see Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt’s “Liturgy as Metaphoric Rhetoric,” in *Christ in Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) esp. 8ff.; and Gordon Lathrop as, for example, “[L]et the Lord’s supper be practiced as a meal. That is: let us use real and beautiful bread and a real drink from a great cup of good wine. Let the altar be seen as table, a great and important and yet utterly simple table, around which we gather, with the one who presides facing us and with the food of our meal on the table. Let the prayer be the great thanksgiving prayer of a meal...” and so on in this allegorical sense, in Lathrop, “Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context,” in Schattauer, *Inside Out*, 209.

meanings would indicate. In that case they would be merely “spiritually” dead and blind, “so-to-speak,” and they merely await being awakened from their dogmatic slumbers. Perhaps the whole Bible, and its extension into the modern world by means of the liturgy, is nothing but a string of signs and symbols that are meant to stimulate the imagination, guide and direct the will to a greater end, and reveal and inspire us from taking our lives as only lowly vocations that leave us stuck helping people with their earthly needs. Or some begin to imagine that worship and its symbols provide a window through which to peek out of the world and into the sacred and spiritual sphere of heaven where they prefer to reside—even if only for a moment.

PROCLAMATION OF WORD AND SACRAMENTS

So, your local worship committee has a tall order: How does one get dead people to worship God and give God his due? How indeed, when they are actively deluding themselves that they are alive and getting somewhere? What would “bring them in” and “church” them, as we say today? What, after all, do the dead like to do? We tend toward activities like teaching people, influencing them, opening up their imaginations, exhorting them, discipling them, shepherding them, dialoguing, communicating, inspiring, and even uniting them into one mystic communion. But what is really relevant and useful to the dead is resurrection. If it could be done, one would think it would be quite attractive—at least to the dead. If humans are really bound, unable to do anything more before God, dead in themselves and so without future, and all the while blind to their plight by the wiles of Satan himself, then what they need on any Sunday—or holy day—is resurrection from the dead. But who or what can do this?

“what is really relevant and useful to the dead is resurrection”

For this specific purpose, God sends a preacher. A preacher announces words, and the words are finally two: You are dead by God’s judgment, and Arise on account of Christ’s forgiveness. These words are the only thing that makes anything in this old world holy, and so they alone fulfill the third commandment to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. In other words, they make faith where there was none. These words are not caught up in the world’s fight between which is more important, being or becoming? Neither are these words rooted in representation or the weaving of a metaphorical world that presumably adds to reality that already exists. These words of God, for lack of a better word, are eschatological. Luther called them *Verbum reale*—words that end the old life and create anew. The difference between what is old and new is faith that trusts the word given for you by the preacher. That faith is a free gift apart from works of the law. Such faith alone justifies us and satisfies God, thus giving God his “due.” That means that true worship makes us, and the Sabbath, holy—simply by the words of Christ (his own self) given to us while we are ungodly in ourselves.

A true worship leader is then no more and no less than a preacher, sent by the Holy Spirit. This preacher conserves the truth of ourselves by making plain who we are in the announcement of Christ's death on the cross. There is no hiding it or hiding the human wills that carried out the crime. Then such preaching produces the radically new: "Arise on account of Christ." The resurrection occurred, there is no hiding it, nor is there hiding the divine will involved in carrying out its purpose. So Peter taught us to preach: "You killed him; the Father raised him" (Acts 2).

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That means that the "essence" of worship lies in the act of proclaiming. To say it doctrinally, justification by faith alone is the center of true worship. Christ, his divinity, humanity, death, resurrection, and Lordship of a new kingdom are to be given presently to his betrayers. They are to be given to the ungodly, who are already dead in their sins by God's own judgment. What the dead need is resurrection, which is no less than the specific forgiveness of their sin of rebellion against the Creator in the killing of the Son. To the great dismay of most, this makes Christian worship repetitive—almost without end. Worship's greatest temptation is satiety, whose voice says, "We've done that before; couldn't we do something else?"

Christian worship is for the forgiveness of sins. People need this day in and day out for their vocations in life, which otherwise become sheer bondages that carry the weight of making ourselves and others righteous. Forgiveness is needed in order to be raised from the dead—daily. Worship is for the justification of the ungodly, day in and day out. It does this by means of a preacher proclaiming God's words of law and gospel. By this means the dead are cured of their blindness and they are raised to new life. God has seen to it that these words are put in things (objects of the old world) so that faith has specific, historical, personal, communal, concrete "somethings" in which the word is put so that hearers may have something to believe in. So, worship concerns giving the proclamation in what the tradition has come to call word and sacrament.

GETTING WORSHIP'S TIME, SPACE, AND DIRECTION RIGHT

When they get a preached God through word and sacraments, Christians are free, royally free. That means they are free from the big concerns of life: law, judgment, sinning, bondage to will, idols, the devil, and even dying. The revolution created by this freedom, along with its conservation of the law in its lower and limited place, makes a series of remarkable changes in the normal worship life of both pagans and God's chosen people, the Jews. Even from the outside this was obvious, since Christians proceeded to change the days they met for sacred worship. They acted as if no day and every day were sacred. Some even said it was worship on the eschatological "eighth" day. From the inside, this freedom resulted from the re-

peated, public announcement of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for our sakes. The only thing that mattered was God's word.

When people have an unpreached God, they are forced to justify themselves before God and others, and they revert to remembrance in the form of sacrifice, even if that sacrifice is no longer of sheep or bulls, but of remembering Christ and invoking the Spirit for their glorification. Sacrifice is supposed to appease God's anger by giving him a sign or symbol of devotion. Such an act requires a separate holy *place* untainted by the sinful world. The *time* of sacrifice is "mythic" time that removes us from normal history and joins us with God where God supposedly prefers to be—outside the world's time and space along with their death and sin. The *direction* of this worship is initiated from below by partly sinful and partly obedient humans, which worship then moves upward to God, who is understood to be distant and hidden in his judgments. Who knows if this time God will accept your sacrifice as he once did Abel's, or if your sacrifice, like Cain's, will be rejected without further explanation? God alone knows; all one can do in the meantime is pray, act, and wait.

Christians no longer function this way. They have a preached God. Worship of the preached God means that time, space, and direction operate in a brand-new way on account of Christ, who, after all, did not wait for further sacrifices or keep himself in heaven above, but came down into our sinful world's time and place to make something new and end all sacrifice. Worship can only be worthwhile when it follows the path of the incarnation all the way to the cross. This presents us with a basic distinction that should guide all worship planning or liturgies: It is not our sacrifice that matters, but Christ's benefits—*beneficium*, not *sacrificium*. It is not what we give but what Christ gives that matters. This is such a sea change that we can hardly even call what happens on Sunday "worship," since worship concerns giving God what is due the divinity. Instead, what happens in worship is whatever God gives to us while we are yet ungodly. The word of God is the whole thing and the only reason for worship. The world does not need sanctification, since its "days," that is, its time and space, are already holy (contrary to the views of those who worship an unpreached God). The problem is not "out there," with a bad world trying to encroach on whatever piety we have managed to preserve. The problem is us and our refusal to believe God's word. The word of God certainly needs no help from you to be right, good, and holy, but what God wants is for his word to come and be holy *to you* specifically, individually, and communally, here and now.¹⁰

Historically this has been too hot to handle for liturgists because it rejects two old spiritualisms that seek to make worship something more than God's word coming to sinners to make them holy. One keeps trying to make priesthood into an improved version of the Levites with their commands to sacrifice. The other tries

¹⁰Luther put it this way in the *Large Catechism*: "The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you." *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 398.87.

to make worship into a celebration of what is already in the human heart. Lutherans are currently surrounded by large seas of “celebration” of spiritual power, either by the eucharistic piety written into our liturgies or by those many churches that simply leave the worship books behind and adopt the American evangelical and Pentecostal patterns of enthusiastic, spirit-drenched festivals of joy. It is good to remember that theological enthusiasm is finally the same thing under different liturgical guises: the search for better words than God has given us, in particular the words that bestow the forgiveness of sins to actual sinners here and now—in bread, wine, water—and the public, verbal announcement of the gospel. Worship wars are not about different tastes or conservative versus progressive social groups, nor are such wars the mere result of generational differences in musical styles. Worship wars have one common goal: the desire to get rid of the forgiveness of sins and the cross of Christ and subsequently the cross each person must bear. Unfortunately, trading cross for glory rids worship of the gospel. Then, all that remains is a grand fight to the death over who has the better piety.

“when Christian freedom is applied to worship the effects remain breathtaking”

When Christian freedom is applied to worship the effects remain breathtaking, as when Luther described the meaning of the commandment to remember the Sabbath: “Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ.”¹¹ We observe Sabbath because our old bodies need rest and our ears need God’s judgment and promises, since the devil seeks always to “take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief.”¹² Luther did the same to the most holy part of the Roman liturgy called the “canon of the mass” or eucharistic prayer, in which God’s word was turned into a sacrifice to God. Even if commanded by the pope, it simply “does not concern us Christians.”

Perhaps you would think Luther was too confident that God’s word actually would be preached, and when it was preached, that it would amount to something great like the resurrection from the dead. But Luther understood that God’s word was not a mere rule to obey or a symbol that helped shape Christians into a unique and special group among the world’s tribes. So Luther ended his teaching of the third commandment this way: “[W]hen we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living.”¹³

¹¹Ibid., 397.82–83.

¹²Ibid., 400.100.

¹³Ibid., 400.101.

A NEW WORSHIP AND NEW CHURCH BASED ON THE PROMISES

This allows me to tell you a different kind of story than Pannenberg's. Well after the Reformation began to radiate out of the University of Wittenberg to surrounding churches, the time came to dedicate the first new "mission" church of the Evangelicals in the town of Torgau. The old liturgy for dedicating a new church was first to use the aspergillum (instrument for sprinkling) to purify. That meant to have the priest take a bough and dip it in holy water and sprinkle about the place (as is suggested in the Renewing Worship "Gathering" rite), thus to recollect to people what their baptism meant. In this tradition baptism had played itself out by washing away original sin, but its power remained symbolically in priests who could bless holy water and baptize the newly born. Then incense, in a censer, would be used at key places around the building where the holy things would occur, the altar and the font, which were set off by a rail or baptistery that separated laypeople from their ordained priests, and unholy from holy places. So in the old tradition a church was dedicated by aspergillum and censer.

The Evangelicals at Torgau didn't really know what to do with their dedication liturgy, so they asked the old teacher Martin Luther to come and "lead worship." What Luther did was preach and pray. His sermon was taken from the gospel text for the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, Luke 14:1–11, about the dispute among the Pharisees over Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. Luther immediately upset the old liturgy composed of sacrifice and eucharistic blessing. The old assumption was that time, place, and people were made holy by priests, who had earlier been made holy and who then set things and people outside the evil world through a ritual cleaning. But Luther knew there was no such command or promise from God regarding aspergillum and censer, and so it stands only as a human tradition. Human traditions can and should be used, but not when they confuse worship's direction—which is first and finally *beneficium*, not *sacrificium*. To make the point, Luther used a double reversal: "You, too, should take hold of the aspergillum," he said to the congregation.¹⁴ The congregation that would be gathering in the new church building had a job from this time forward. They were to help see that "nothing else may ever happen" in the new church than that God speaks (the ordained pastor's job) in the church and they hear him. "Lay" people were to take hold of this job, and further yet, they must see to it that the normal direction of worship is reversed. It is not what you are giving to God, even by way of thanks, but what God is giving to you that matters. So, we are to avoid all temptations to confuse these. It must be God who acts for you through his holy word. From this we have a simple definition of true, Christian worship, that "nothing else may ever happen in [this new house] except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise."¹⁵ Thus we have our principles for evangelical worship:

¹⁴Luther, *Sermon at the Dedication*, 51:333.

¹⁵Ibid.

- First, the **direction** will be clear: from God to us—first and finally.
- Second, the **means** God uses to get to us will be clear: his Word, who is Jesus Christ crucified.
- Third, something will **happen**. Better yet, nothing will happen except that “our dear Lord himself speaks to us,” permanently interrupting our lives and cultures of death by bringing new life—not metaphorically, but really.
- Fourth, this limits **human tradition** as the starting point and “meaning” or purpose for worship (“like the papists’ churches with their bishops’ chrism and censing”).¹⁶
- Fifth, this means that the “**human role**” in worship is first to **hear** the preaching of Scripture, then in response, to “call on him together,” that is to **pray together**.

This is the dialectic, or dialog form of worship among Evangelicals—but it is this single and particular dialectic or dialog, not any dialog in general. In other words, our role is perfect passivity as the “Amen” to Christ’s justification of the ungodly.

So the service “order” used at the new Evangelical church at Castle Torgau began with the *reading* of the lesson, then Luther *preached* it to the congregation by means of distinguishing the law and the gospel and properly applying the pronoun “you” upon the waiting sinners. The result, not measured by piety but by God’s own holy word, is that the bound are made free by Christ and the dead are raised. Preaching this way then led immediately to *prayer* in the form of the Lord’s Prayer, which is none other than learning to pray “under the cross,” that is, in light both of Christ’s cross for our salvation and our own crosses that we are given to bear since no one who tries to keep his life will save it (Mark 8).

Here are the “essential” moments of public worship: reading, preaching, prayer. Better yet, you have worship radiating out of the center of the gospel that reaches those who need it: the unjust, sinful, distraught, condemned, and dead.

Worship then keeps you from running out of this world for pious reasons. Instead of separating you from the “pagan” world, and seeking better community than that given through vocation, true worship commissions you “to spread that which God has so graciously given us.” Then the Spirit leads us to acts of love that normally will flow out of our daily vocations wherever they have been given in life. Christ’s worship is to read, then preach, then *heal!*¹⁷ That means, not just resuscitate, but raise from the dead, and it means going about doing good works for others. Hypocrites come from those who seek to make the Sabbath a fulfillment of the law in another way—that is, by making themselves holy. Instead, they have chosen

¹⁶Luther redirected the year to preaching and away from the cult of the saints and penance. In this way, the lectionary becomes prominent in a new way—getting preachers to preach the whole story of Christ’s redemption of sinners and recognize that in it God would be working law and gospel as the way to make sinners right apart from the law in Christ alone (*ibid.*, 333–334).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 344.

other words and so set up idols for alternative works that they think are more “spiritual.” So, Luther observed that day long ago at Torgau, “But these have nothing on their side except their own fabricated human trash and self-chosen works and life, which they elevate far above God’s commandment.”¹⁸

So we come back to our starting point and put the proper criticism to any proposed liturgy: “Beloved, put it on the scales and weigh it according to God’s Word.” What is remembering the Sabbath? What makes holy? God’s word does that. Is that first our word of thanks? No, it is the word of Christ called “gospel.” And what is that gospel? Since Christ’s grace is so great, it comes in these many, specific forms of command and promise: (1) the preaching from Scripture of law and gospel that kills and makes alive, (2) the command and promise of baptism, (3) the command and promise of the Lord’s Supper, (4) the command and promise of absolution, (5) the command and promise of his presence “where two or three are gathered together in my name.”¹⁹

Worship in the evangelical sense must mean that these promises are the free gifts of Christ to sinners for the forgiveness of sins, or to say the same thing, they are the benefits given to those dead in their sins in order to raise them from the dead. When these words go out they make hearers (even among those who are lacking in individual and communal piety) who assemble and want to listen again and again—daily, weekly, and throughout the year. That means that in each of the promises we find the same forgiveness of sins repeatedly being given, yet given in different ways appropriate for making faith. It would be better never to meet if you do not preach the word that is read out publicly. When you believe in the promises given there, you believe in none other than Christ himself, clothed in his word for you. After receiving such a gift, you will pray by way of giving thanks and asking freely for what is needed in the world and in the church, for ourselves and for our neighbors. So we confess and absolve, baptize whenever possible, give the Lord’s Supper as needed, read Scripture and preach from it, and pray by way of thankful response, despite our experiences and feelings to the contrary—especially in great hymns that bring the word deep into the heart and express our deepest need and thanks. This is true worship of the preached God, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. 

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¹⁸Ibid., 345–346.

¹⁹Here Luther’s *Smalcald Articles* are especially helpful, especially part III.4, “Concerning the Gospel,” where God’s extravagant grace is given in the central promises made in Christian worship (Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 319).